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AUTHOR Oberhuemer, Pamela
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ABSTRACT

This paper, presented in three parts, examines the role of the early childhood professional in Europe. Part 1 of the paper examines how various European countries broadly conceptualize the early childhood professional role. Four broad categories are described: (1) early childhood pedagogue; (2) preschool specialist; (3) teacher; and (4) social pedagogue. This section notes that teachers and preschool specialists, rooted in public education-based systems, are likely to perceive their work as child-oriented and education-based, whereas the early childhood and social pedagogues are likely to view their profession in a wider context. Part 2 of the paper pinpoints recent developments in early education and care policies in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. This section notes that, in most cases, decentralization and local government reform have been taking place in the context of restrained public spending and a climate of raised expectations concerning accountability for outcomes. Part 3 outlines dimensions of an emerging role profile and considers some challenges and changes for the profession and for public perceptions of early years education and care. This new role profile includes the following dimensions: (1) conceptualizing and developing a program; (2) presenting and legitimating professional practice to lay audiences; (3) implementing cooperative forms of management; (4) developing participatory roles for parents; (5) developing strategies for involving fathers and parents from minority backgrounds; (6) linking educational activities with community network activities for families; (7) supporting parent self-help groups; (8) cooperating with other professional agencies; and (8) examining and experimenting with different approaches toward quality development and evaluation. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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Conceptualising the professional role in early childhood centres: Emerging profiles in four European countries

Pamela Oberhuemer
State Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research (IFP), München
Prinzregentenstr. 24, D-80538 München, Germany
Email KL211ah@mail.lrz-muenchen.de

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Introduction

I shall present my paper in three parts. First I shall look at how different countries in Europe broadly conceptualise the early childhood professional and consider some related issues of professionalism. In a second section I shall pinpoint recent developments in early education and care policies in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and England/UK and raise some questions concerning their potential impact on professional activities in early childhood centres. And finally I shall outline some dimensions of an emergent role profile and consider some challenges and chances that this may bring, both for the profession and for public perceptions of early years education and care.

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Professional role typologies in selected EU countries

Who counts as an early childhood professional? Drawing on data from a recent cross-national study in the 15 European Union countries carried out with colleagues (Oberhuemer and Ulich 1997), I have discovered that there are considerable national variations. Not only are there differences between countries, but also within countries. If we focus on the differences *between* countries, and on the practitioners with group responsibility in the main form of publicly funded provision in each country, four broad categories emerge (Table 1).

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Table 1: Professional Role Typologies, European Union Countries

Role Typology	Focus of Training	Countries
Early childhood Pedagogue	Children from birth to compulsory school age	Finland (*lastentarhanopettaja*) Sweden (*förskollärare*) Spain (*maestro de EGB especialista en educación infantil*)
Pre-school specialist	The two or three years preceding school entry	Belgium (*institutrice/instituteur de maternelle / kleuterleid(st)ter*) Greece (*nipiagogos*) Luxembourg (*instituteur / Institutrice de l'éducation préscolaire*)
Teacher	Nursery *and* primary education (age-range 3 – 11/12)	France (*professeur des écoles*) Ireland (*national teacher*) Netherlands (*leraar basisonderwijs*)
Social pedagogue	Various workfields *including* early childhood education	Denmark (*paedagog*) (age-Range 0-99) Germany (*Erzieherin/Erzieher*) (age-range 0-14-27) Luxembourg(*éducateur / éducatrice*) (for work with all ages outside the education system)

As we can see, training is conceptualised for different categories of professional.

- In Finland, Sweden and in Spain training focuses on work with children from birth up to compulsory schooling at the age of 6 or 7 years. These professionals can be described as **early childhood pedagogues**. This is a role conceptualisation based on a coherent view of provision for young children prior to compulsory schooling, a view combining elements of education and care. It gives the early childhood field a status of its own, separate from that of compulsory schooling.

- In Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg, the age-focus of initial training is narrower. It concentrates on the two or three years preceding compulsory schooling. These are professionals who could be called **pre-school specialists**. Their role is predominantly educational, and the institutions they work in come under the responsibility of the national education authorities. In Belgium and Greece training is separate from that of teaching staff in primary schools, in Luxembourg there is some overlap.

- Professionals in the *écoles maternelles* in France, in the school-based, non-compulsory preprimary classes in Ireland, or in the non-compulsory section of the

Basisschool in the Netherlands are all trained to be **teachers** for both the nursery and the primary sector. Clearly located within the public education system, they are trained for a much broader age-range than the pre-school specialists. Although they may have had a specific focus on the early years during some period of their training, time allocation always has to compete with that for the more dominant compulsory school sector.

- The term **social pedagogue** is used to describe a broader-based role typology to be found in Denmark, Germany and Luxembourg. In Germany the main professional group (*Erzieherinnen* (f), *Erzieher* (m)) is trained for work in various settings outside compulsory schooling, as are the *éducateurs* (m) and *éducatrices* (f) in Luxembourg. In Germany the early childhood sector is the predominant occupational field. In Denmark there is no specific age-group focus on children. *Paedagoger* are prepared for work with both children and adults in a variety of settings outside the compulsory school system.

Issues of professionalism

These different role typologies reflect different cultural notions of what it means to be an early childhood professional. Behind these various profiles are varied histories and varying ideas about how societies view the role of early childhood institutions and the people who work in them. These in turn shape the images that early childhood professionals have of themselves. Teachers or pre-school specialists rooted in public education systems with a prescribed framework of accountability are more likely to perceive their work as predominantly child-oriented and educational, whereas the early childhood pedagogues and the workers with a broader-based, socio-pedagogical training are more likely to view their profession in a wider context – child-oriented, but also family and community-oriented. These are issues around the concept of professionalism. The different role typologies would seem to suggest that what counts as professional knowledge or as professional action is a matter of interpretation, depending on the particular cultural discourse used to define and evaluate these concepts.

In the field of mainstream schooling, teacher professionalism is currently a much-discussed issue. In a wide-ranging analysis of studies in various national contexts Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson come to the conclusion that: "What it means to be professional, to show professionalism or to pursue professionalisation is not universally agreed or understood." (1996, p.4) This is certainly the case in the traditionally female-dominated occupational field of non-compulsory early childhood education and care (cf., for example, Finkelstein 1988; Ebert 1996; Tallberg Broman 1997; Penn & McQuail 1997; Colberg-Schrader & Krug 1999; Owen et al 1999).

A further complication lies in the fact that the main knowledge base which has long informed professional action in early childhood institutions – developmental psychology – has been challenged in recent years as the dominant discourse in the field (Dahlberg et al 1999). It has been argued that the content of most training courses concerning the parameters of socialisation, growth, learning and teaching is based on predominantly Western scientific and pedagogical traditions. Cultural diversity and cultural politics

even today remain under-addressed issues – not only in training, but also in policy and research.

While professionalism is an unclear and a contested concept, it is nevertheless generally agreed that it is linked to 'quality of action' within a specific occupational field. It would therefore seem necessary to examine some of the present challenges for early childhood professionals that are transforming the structure and content of professional activities.

Change mechanisms impacting on the practitioner role

In a current study I shall be looking at the practitioner role in four countries: Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and England. During the preliminary phase of the project, besides interviewing researchers, administrators and practitioners in these countries, I have been reviewing data on recent changes in legislation, policy and steering systems. In most cases, decentralisation and local government reform have been taking place in the context of restrained public spending and a climate of raised expectations concerning accountability for outcomes.

Germany

1990 in Germany – the year of unification - marked the merging of a socialist state system of extensive childcare into a more market-oriented and less subsidised western approach towards publicly-funded services. In the same year, a new Child and Youth Services Act came into force, and despite the common task of adaptation to this new legislation, the divergent starting points in the eastern and western parts of the country have precipitated two distinctly different lines of development.

In the western part of Germany the focus has been on the *expansion* of provision in order to meet a pledge in the Child and Youth Services Act to introduce legal entitlement to a kindergarten place for every child from the age of 3 years. This goal has been more or less reached in quantative terms. However, the quality of the places offered is still a matter for debate. Both dimensions have been impacting on the work of practitioners in kindergartens. On the one hand, the expansion drive – in a climate of economic constraint – has left centre staff in many regions facing cuts in the standards of their working conditions. At the same time, expectations are growing concerning the pivotal role of practitioners in the development of high quality services (Oberhuemer & Colberg-Schrader, in press).

The picture in the eastern *Länder* looks quite different. Here the major issue over the past decade has been one of *reducing* services within a context of a sharp fall in the birth-rate, a high rise in unemployment, particularly among women, and a different overall policy of childcare. These developments have all had predominantly negative effects on job availability, on staff employment chances and patterns and on professional self-esteem.

At the same time, the Child and Youth Services Act places the professional activities of

educators in both the eastern and western *Länder* in broader parameters than before. Besides providing both education and care (*Betreuung, Bildung und Erziehung*) and helping to 'advance the development of the child into a responsible member of society', kindergartens and other daycare facilities are required to educationally and organisationally adapt to the needs of the children´s families; they are expected to include parents more in decision-making processes, to collaborate with other local agencies concerned with children and families, and to be involved in local planning policies.

These expectations come at a time of local government reforms aimed at streamlining administrative practices, of increasing marketisation of services, and of accompanying moves towards deregulation. The providers of early childhood services – municipalities, church and other welfare organisations – face the pressure of increasing competition and accountability. Practitioners are clearly key links in the process of repositioning early childhood centres in the context of the current 'quality debate'.

Denmark

In Denmark, a well-established decentralised system has given individual centres a considerable degree of autonomy. For some years now, parents have been guaranteed by law a central role in consultation and decision-making processes. Together with parents, the centre staff draw up a plan of activity for the coming year. For the practitioners this new collaborative framework entails making taken-for-granted routines explicit, it demands transparency with regard to educational goals and practices, it involves reflecting on and evaluating the centre programme through the eyes of committed non-professionals. Interesting questions here are: What effects is this changed framework having on the practitioners' self-image and concept of professionalism? Where do they see the advantages, where the problems of this close collaboration?

In a recent review of changes in early childhood education in Denmark, Stig Broström (1999) suggests that – following the results of an international comparative study on reading standards, which showed Denmark to be performing lower than many other countries – signs of a "back to basics" movement are emerging in what has traditionally been a system of highly rating children´s independence and self-initiated activities. Could this mean that practitioners are changing their views? Or that they are taking a backseat in a discussion dominated by politicians, parents and researchers? Questions such as these would appear to need some unravelling.

Sweden

In Sweden decentralisation is a more recent phenomenon. The transition from a centrally regulated to a decentralised and for the first time partly privatised system of early childhood education and care means both more autonomy and more chances for individual initiative; it also holds more risks concerning the programme that centres choose to follow. How do practitioners react if parents express wishes for a more formalised learning setting than traditional pre-school culture in Sweden? How are differences of opinion as to what is `best for the child' negotiated? And how do women practitioner-

cope with the element of competitiveness that this new positioning in the local community involves? On the one hand, researchers are suggesting that early childhood institutions need to resituate themselves in the community as projects of social, educational and cultural significance (Dahlberg et al. 1999.) On the other hand, Sweden has a rather weak tradition of parental involvement and the idea of centres as neighbourhood centres is a fairly recent one. And at present a quite different issue is the current focus of professional discussion. For the first time in Sweden, practitioners are required to work within a stated curriculum framework. This is one of the outcomes of the restructuring of early childhood services in 1997, when they were placed for the first time under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The accompanying guidelines to the curriculum expressly state that the centre team is responsible for ensuring that work is directed towards the goals of the curriculum. Practitioners are therefore currently more concerned with strengthening the inner dynamics of the centre team.

England

Compared with Denmark or Sweden, England is a country which has a diverse and up to now fragmented system of early childhood services. Over the past two years or so the New Labour government has introduced a series of policy initiatives aimed at improving this situation. One of these is the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships scheme which hopes to produce more effective region-based planning and co-ordination among the great variety of service providers. How will these Partnerships impact on the practitioners in the various settings? How actively will they be involved in decision-making processes, and how will this affect the way they see their own practice? Another initiative has been the introduction of so-called Early Excellence Centres. The centres that have been chosen for this purpose are "one-stop-shops", i.e. multifunctional centres linking educational provision for children with diverse services for families. A high-profile institution of this kind is the Pen Green Centre for Under 5´s and their Families, which is well known for its innovative forms of parental involvement, in particular father involvement, and for establishing links with all kinds of further and higher education institutions to ensure that the centre is also a place for continuing learning, not only for staff, but also for parents (Whalley 1997). How will these Early Excellence Centres influence role perceptions in other early childhood settings?

Emerging role profiles – challenges and chances for the early childhood profession

Creating a stimulating learning environment in which all children are encouraged to explore their full potential has long been a stated task of early childhood institutions. However, the developments I have briefly outlined suggest that – at least in the four countries I have chosen for analysis - a conscious step is under way towards extending traditional educational perspectives. Drawing on my knowledge and experience of the situation in Germany (Oberhuemer & Colberg-Schrader, in press), it would appear that a new profile of professional activities is emerging, one which can also be related to developments in Denmark, Sweden and Britain. This profile includes the following dimensions:

- Conceptualising and developing a programme - in dialogue with parents, providers and representatives of the local community - which reflects both the needs of individual children and families and the specific location of the centre
- Presenting and legitimating professional practice in front of a lay audience (e.g. local politicians, interested citizens)
- Implementing co-operative forms of centre management, decision-making processes and administration of resources
- Developing a wide spectrum of participatory roles for a broad range of parents
- Developing specific strategies for involving fathers and parents from minority ethnic backgrounds
- Linking educational activities for children with community network activities for families
- Supporting parent self-help groups
- Co-operating with other professional agencies on a regular basis (e.g. educational, medical, therapeutical services)
- Examining and experimenting with different approaches towards quality development and evaluation (self-assessment, peer evaluation, external assessment)

Little is known about practitioners' views on this emerging role transformation, with its new emphasis on negotiating and networking competencies. For example, research in the United States on early childhood educators´ belief systems suggests that a majority of practitioners believes that early childhood centres should serve children alone, rather than families (Burton-Maxwell & Gullo 1995). Here – referring back to the different role typologies – we can conclude that this is a question that initial and further training will need to address. A number of British universities have taken a welcome step forward by introducing Early Childhood Studies degrees which take a broader view of early childhood services than most teacher training courses (Calder 1999). In Germany, initial training – even through it is broad-based in principle - is certainly in need of radical reform to meet the requirements of such a role profile (AGJ/OMEP 1998).

Some practitioners will undoubtedly view current developments as a chance to enhance and extend their professionalism. However, within the present climate of economic rationalism and its emphasis on transparency and accountability, it could well be that practitioners will perceive these changes as a threat. Not only professional support systems such as in-service training and advisory networks, but also research and policy need to focus more on the interplay of these contradictory forces in the field of early childhood education. Practitioners find themselves at the centre of simultaneous changes which may be regarded as an insurmountable task - or as a chance to raise the political status of early childhood education and care in the public domain and to reconstruct their own professional self-image.

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